

Toowoomba hearing ends in Brisbane

A heavy sense of despair filled the Brisbane hearing rooms as the Royal Commission wrapped up six days of hearings this week. The tragic case of 13 young girls abused at a Toowoomba Catholic primary school has been a miserable saga on every front.

The former Bishop of Toowoomba, Bill Morris was the final witness and spoke of the number of systemic failings that lead to the failure to properly deal with the abuse following the initial report.

These ranged across the failure to report the abuse to police, re-engaging the abuser as a casual teacher after he had left the school, and the school's child protection kit being out of date at the time.

The suffering and sense of tragedy and terror that families continue to live with over what happened to their daughters is palpable. These girls and their families were totally let down by the Catholic school system and their anger and frustration is completely understandable.

The consequences and the fall out of the tragic events in Toowoomba have impacted on the lives of so many. Firstly, and most tragically, on the lives of the young girls who were abused. During the hearings teachers and staff who worked at the school, the Catholic Education Office and those that admitted failure and lack of insight, all spoke of their misery and sense of devastation about the case.

Throughout the country parents, with children attending Catholic schools, may feel uneasy about the incompetent handling and poor judgment in the Toowoomba case. They may question the ability of the Catholic education system to adequately care for their children.

To regain confidence it is incumbent on all Catholic school authorities to not only assure parents that better systems and compliance are in place to protect their children, but that those systems are regularly and routinely checked.

With the tragedy of Toowoomba still felt so deeply the Catholic Church will again be the focus of the Royal Commission from 10 March in Sydney. The hearings will commence into the case of civil action taken by John Ellis, the case that highlighted the difficulty that exists in suing the Catholic Church.

The Royal Commission will then move to Adelaide on 17 March where the responses by the Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide and the South Australian Police to allegations of child sexual abuse at St Ann's Special School will be examined.

Blog

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Last week there was a short Royal Commission directions hearing into some of the legal issues relating to the St Ann's hearing. It was reassuring to hear the unequivocal commitment of the Archdiocese of Adelaide to support the Royal Commission and their desire for everything to be revealed and the truth to be told. Catholic Church Insurance also confirmed their commitment and support of the Royal Commission process.

This week I am meeting with the supervisory group to discuss our submission for Issues Papers No. 5 - Civil Litigation. These Issues Papers are an important part of the Royal Commission and the Council has prepared detailed submissions for all four Issues Papers so far.

The Civil Litigation paper will highlight a number of very significant issues for the Catholic Church, including identifying who can be sued and the liability of an Institution for the criminal conduct of their employees or other children. We will also continue to advance our proposals for establishing an oversight body that will hold all Bishops and Church authorities to standards of performance in child protection in Catholic facilities.

As the Catholic Church once again comes under the scrutiny of the Royal Commission we must again brace ourselves for more tragic and painful stories that will shake our core beliefs in the Church. Our thoughts will be with the survivors as they prepare to relive the horror of their abuse.

There is no doubt that the news from every hearing is shocking and appalling, but the Council remains strong, determined and committed to 'get this right'. We will ensure the Church fesses up to past wrongs, and fully explains its actions or inactions. We will work hard to comfort and support survivors both pastorally and financially. And we will develop and implement reforms that will protect children in this country.

Francis Sullivan

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